

October 15, 2009 - Administration Fights to Protect Secret Propaganda Budget

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By David Rogers

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Growing by leaps and bounds, the Pentagon's secretive Information Operations budget keeps tripping over some basic information — like how much it costs.

Just months ago, the Defense Department said it needed \$988 million to help win hearts and minds in the new fiscal year beginning Oct. 1. When the House cut this by half in July, top-level officials landed on Capitol Hill, pleading their case but also making a startling admission: Their budget needs for 2010 are actually \$626.2 million — more than one-third less than first estimated.

Even at the Pentagon, an error of that size gets attention. "That \$988 million number stuck, to our regret," a defense official told POLITICO. And one man who hasn't forgotten is Rep. John Murtha, who chairs the defense appropriations panel that funds the IO budget.

"The information war is off to a bad start with bad information," the Pennsylvania Democrat laughed Wednesday in an interview. "They all said the same thing: 'We made a mistake. We realize that we fumbled the ball.' And they were very apologetic. Everybody is. But they go back and say, 'This is very important.'"

Indeed, combat commanders, beginning with Army Gen. David Petraeus, have stressed IO programs as a key factor in winning popular support in Iraq — and now hopefully in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The level of concern about losing the money is real enough that the Pentagon and State Department have mounted a full-court press to stave off cuts.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Mike Mullen, Deputy Defense Secretary William Lynn and Jack Lew, an old hand in the House and now deputy secretary of state for management and resources, have all raised the issue with Murtha. With an eye toward upcoming House-Senate talks on defense spending, Michele Flournoy, undersecretary of defense for policy, met with Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) on the issue last week.

The great problem is that the numbers mix-up only adds to the misgivings of an old-school Marine like Murtha, who views the ever-expanding IO budget as a hangover from Donald Rumsfeld's years and a propaganda machine ill-suited for uniformed military.

"I just don't like the idea that the military is in the propaganda business," he told POLITICO. "I don't like it."

Murtha's preference is that the State Department take more of the lead, although he admits State can't ramp up fast enough to handle the task this coming year.

"They're going to have to depend on the Defense Department," he said. "The problem with the Defense Department is they're not only willing to take care of it; they will push you right aside in order to take care of it."

This aggressive style was Rumsfeld's trademark as secretary of defense for most of George W. Bush's presidency and as an early champion of the IO programs.

Pentagon documents describe the mission broadly, running from electronic warfare to psychological operations. Major portions of the budget are classified, but it has made headlines before for allegedly paying to plant stories in the overseas press that are favorable to U.S. policy in Iraq, for example.

Defense officials say the focus is exclusively overseas, chiefly in war areas now such as Iraq and Afghanistan, where U.S. troops must contend with anti-American information campaigns by Iran or the Taliban.

Critics contend that there is too little coordination of the expenditures and question the effectiveness of contracts focused on the Internet or television advertising in a theater like Afghanistan, where many villagers don't have TVs or computers. The House Appropriations Committee report, justifying the first \$500 million cut in July, was often scathing in its tone; Republican and Democratic staffers began asking questions last spring, amid the wartime spending bill, and have collaborated in the panel's efforts to get more answers from the Pentagon.

"At face value, much of what is being produced appears to be United States military and, more alarmingly, nonmilitary, propaganda, public relations and behavioral modification messaging," the report reads. "The committee questions the effectiveness of much of the material being produced with this funding, the supposed efforts to minimize target audience knowledge of United States government sponsorship of certain production materials and the ability of the department to evaluate the impact of these programs."

There's no doubt that costs have soared. Even the greatly reduced \$626.2 million estimate for 2010 is more than double the \$244.6 million the Pentagon estimates it spent in 2007.

Some of this growth may reflect the influence of Petraeus, who took over command of Iraq in 2007 and now leads the U.S. Central Command, overseeing Afghanistan, as well. "Petraeus claims this is one of the key elements in changing people's minds in Iraq," Murtha said. "I don't know where he gets that information or how he gets it. But he claims it's so important, the military, in particular, is in favor of this information program because of that. So everybody had talked to me about it at the highest level, from the CIA to the Defense Department and the State Department. All of them."

"There's been exponential growth in the last three years," said a defense official. Even prior to the flap now, the same official said, the department recognized there had to be more coordination — a single "enterprise" — to better pull together the various initiatives by regional commanders.

The \$988 million estimate resulted from just such confusion; the Pentagon says it mixed up its own budget data with estimated "requirements" sent in by commanders in the field. "We mistakenly mixed budget data with requirements reports from combat commanders," the official said.

"They were so far off with the number I don't care how they explain it," said Murtha. "They got it wrong."

"That's exactly what started it. They were so far off with the number, and then we get into the details of what's going on. We want to know exactly how do you spend the money, where do you spend it, how'd you have such an impact."